

The Environmentalist of the Poor: Anil Agarwal

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The Berkeley Nobel Laureate George Akerlof once remarked of his fellow economists that if you showed them something that worked in practice, they would not be satisfied unless it was also seen to work in theory. This insight explains much about the dismal science, including why, as late as 1980, the MIT economist Lester Thurow could so magisterially write: 'If you look at the countries that are interested in environmentalism, or at the individuals who support environmentalism within each country, one is struck by the extent to which environmentalism is an interest of the upper middle class. Poor countries and poor individuals simply aren't interested.'

It does not appear that Thurow looked very closely around the globe. For, seven years before he wrote his lines, the Chipko Andolan had decisively announced the poor's entry into the domain of environmentalism. Nor was Chipko unique: the decade of the 1970s saw a whole slew of popular movements in defence of local rights to forest, fish and water resources, as well as protests against large dams. These movements took place in India, Brazil, Malaysia, Ecuador and Kenya, and among peasants, pastoralists, and fisher folk: that is, among communities even economists could identify as being poor. Lester Thurow could write as he did because of the theory that environmentalism is the full stomach phenomenon. In the West the rise of the green movement in the 1960s was widely interpreted as a manifestation of what was called 'post-materialism'. The consumer societies of the North Atlantic world, wrote the political scientist Ronald Inglehart, had collectively shifted 'from giving top priority to physical sustenance and safety toward heavier emphasis on belonging, self-expression, and the quality of life.' It was thought that a cultivated interest in the protection of nature was possible only when the necessities of life could be taken for granted. As for the poor, their waking hours were spent foraging for food, water, housing, energy: how could they be concerned with something as elevated as the *environment*.

Movements such as Chipko challenged the post-materialist hypothesis, in practice. But its decisive theoretical refutation was the work of the campaigning journalist Anil Agarwal, who died in Dehradun on the 2nd of January 2002, aged fifty-four. Agarwal was a man of ferocious intelligence and commitment, these traits displayed early. At the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, where he studied mechanical engineering, he was elected president of the students' gymkhana. After he graduated, he travelled in Europe but came back to join the *Hindustan Times* as a science reporter, this when his class-mates were taking the already well-trodden route to the United States. His flair for communicating complex ideas in clear language was recognized by the *New Scientist*, for which he also began to write.

The story that changed Agarwal's life originated in a visit to the Alakananda valley sometime in early 1975. The Chipko Andolan was then less than two years old. But Agarwal was impressed by what it had already done and more impressed still by its leader, Chandi Prasad Bhatt.

Agarwal returned from Garhwal with an essay that, with a key word misspelt, was printed in the *New Scientist* under the title 'Ghandi's Ghost Protects the Himalayan

Trees'. It might have been the first account of the Chipko movement in the international press. It was certainly a definitive moment in the career of its author. It was through Chipko that Agarwal came to understand that the poor had, if anything, a greater stake in the responsible management of the environment. That insight became the driving force of his work over the next twenty-five years.

In the mid 1970s Agarwal moved to London to join the International Institute for Environment and Development. There he came under the caring tutelage of Barbara Ward, the author with Rene Dubos of *Only One Earth*, the 'official' text of the first United Nations Symposium on the Environment. Then, encouraged by that remarkable civil servant Lovraj Kumar, he decided to return to India to found the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in New Delhi.

Not long after founding CSE, Agarwal went for a meeting in Malaysia, a trip that was as definitive as his earlier trek to Garhwal. For his hosts in Penang had just published a report on the 'State of Malaysia's Environment'. It was a slim document, but suggestive. No sooner had he read it than Agarwal started planning a more ambitious Indian version. The material was at hand, if one cared to look for it. For the natural resource conflicts of the 1970s had been attentively and sympathetically documented by our journalists, writing in English as well as in the Indian languages. The academic community was by and large blind to the degradation of the environment, but here too there were exceptions, most notably the partnership of the ecologist Madhav Gadgil and the anthropologist Kailash Malhotra. These two had just completed an extended study on behalf of the newly instituted Department of Environment, which documented the shrinking access to nature in the villages and hamlets of India. There was also the work on fisheries by John Kurien and on common property by N.S. Jodha: two economists with a most atypical orientation towards fieldwork.

Drawing on these scattered studies, and aided by his colleagues Ravi Chopra and Kalpana Sharma, Agarwal and the CSE published *The State of India's Environment 1982: A Citizens' Report*. This was a landmark, in an intellectual sense—as the first serious overview of the use and abuse of nature in India. But its merits were as much about form as content. The report was attractively produced and imaginatively laid out plenty of pictures interwoven with the text, artfully designed to highlight salutary or egregious examples, numbers and tables sparingly but effectively used.

This work, often referred to as the First Citizens' Report was, in a word, a triumph. Two years later the CSE put out a Second Citizens' Report, edited by Agarwal and his colleague Sunita Narain, an effervescent young activist who had come to environmentalism through the Delhi-based students' group, Kalpavriksh. This report was pre-sented as elegantly as its predecessor, but it was more thorough, and enriched by two essays on the politics of the environment, written by Agarwal and Dunu Roy.

The Citizens' Reports were a simultaneous wake-up call to an insular academy, a half-blind state, and a somnolent public. They were read, discussed, and acted upon, and came to enjoy an influence far in excess of what its editors anticipated: this influence not being out of proportion with their intrinsic value. Among the signs of how good the reports were was the fact that their Kannada and Hindi translators were Shivarama Karanth, the great Kannada novelist and polymath; and the respected environmentalist and Chipko historian Anupam Mishra.

In between the publication of the two Citizens' Reports, Anil Agarwal lectured in Calcutta. I lived then in that city. I was in the last throes of a Ph.D. dissertation on forests and social protest in the Him-alaya. During the course of my research I had met Agarwal, interviewed him on his encounters with Chipko, and raided the files on the movement that he generously placed at my disposal. Like him, I had met and been captivated by Chandi Prasad Bhatt. My conversion to their brand of environmentalism, however, was interrupted at every stage by my milieu, by the dominance in Calcutta of a worldview that regarded ecology as a bourgeois deviation from the class struggle.

It was to such a sceptical audience that Anil Agarwal was asked to speak. The talk was held in the Mahabodhi Society, in a long low hall which, like all such places in Calcutta, had a marked scarcity of light. But this dark room was gloriously illuminated by the lecturer. Agarwal was a little man, five feet four inches at most, his figure made less prepossessing by a heavily banded pair of spectacles. Yet the glasses could not hide the sparkle, nor the slightness of his figure overshadow the manifest energy and enthusiasm. Bobbing up and down the podium, he delivered a missionary sermon to a bunch of pagans, piling up example upon example of the destruction of nature and its impact on the poor. The crowd, at first unbelieving, slowly came round, persuaded by the integrity of the man as much by the solid core of his message.

Agarwal was that rare bird, a superb public speaker who was also a skilled writer. (Indians who are good at the one form of communication are generally hopeless at the other.) He had a way of immediately attracting the reader's attention, most often through clever juxtaposition. Thus his flamboyant but also deeply insightful remark of how natural resources management in India was a case of 'nineteenth-century laws for twenty-first century realities'. Thus also his mischievous yet not entirely facetious desire to define GNP afresh as 'Gross Nature Product'. I recall, too, a piece on how the Maharashtra government had been forbidden by the Forest Conservation Act to construct water taps for pilgrims en route to the shrine of Bhimashankar. Agarwal suggested that the application to the Centre be reworded to claim that the taps were intended for migrating elephants. (The recommendation was acutely topical, for the environment minister at the time was the animal fundamentalist Maneka Gandhi.)

Under Agarwal's leadership, the CSE played a critical role in at least four environmental campaigns. To begin with, the Chipko experience informed his participation in the countrywide struggle for a democratic forest management. This struggle won a partial success when, in 1988, the Indian parliament accepted that ecological stability and people's needs, rather than commercial exploitation, were to be the cornerstones of the new, 'official', forest policy. Inspired by the same ideals of local participation and control were the CSE's seminars and reports on traditional water harvesting. These, emphasizing the creative partnership between indigenous knowledge and collective action, were compiled in a valuable volume with the characteristically catchy title, *Dying Wisdom*.

Admiration for the work of Anil Agarwal and the CSE was never confined to India. Nonetheless, their presence on the global stage was enhanced by the publication, in 1989, of *Global Warming in an Unequal World*, a pamphlet co-authored by Agarwal and Sunita Narain. This made a distinction between the 'survival emissions' of the poor, as for instance the methane released by paddy cultivation, and the 'luxury emissions' of the

rich, such as the gases released into the atmosphere by the automobile-industrial complex. The conventional wisdom out of Washington sought to suggest that the poor were as responsible for global warming: thus, countries such as India and China needed to be as quick and ready in their remedial measures as, say, the United States and Germany. This wisdom had been re-stated in a report of the World Resources Institute (WRI), a report which Agarwal and Narain brutally took apart. They showed, first, that the WRI report erased the past, the historical responsibility for the build-up of greenhouse gases by the industrialized countries; and second, that in its prescriptions for the future the WRI made the unfair and illogical assumption that the carbon 'sink' provided by the oceans and atmosphere should be divided in proportion to the magnitude of greenhouse gases currently emitted by each country. A more just and tenable assumption, argued the Indians, would be to allocate each individual human being an equal share of the carbon sink.

The WRI report, in sum, sought to blame the victims and reward the polluters. This, said Agarwal and Narain, was an unhappy but by no means unique illustration of the 'environmental colonialism' that ruled international negotiations on climate change and the protection of biodiversity. As the CSE complained in a 'Statement on Global Democracy' issued specially for the Earth Summit of June 1992:

There is no effort to create new levels of power that would allow all citizens of the world to participate in global environmental management. Today, the reality is that: Northern governments and institutions can, using their economic and political power, intervene in, say, Bangladesh's development. But no Bangladeshi can intervene in the development processes of Northern economies even if global warming caused largely by Northern emissions may submerge half [“their”] country.

Even so, at least one Indian was able to positively intervene in global debates. Sometimes his influence passed unnoticed. Thus, the World-watch Institute has reproduced, more-or-less wholesale, the framework of the CSE Citizens' Reports in its own *State of the World Reports*, issued annually since 1987. These follow the Indian example in dividing the work into thematic sections, using boxes as a key illustrative device, and seeking to address multiple audiences—policy as well as popular. The imitation is so obvious that in a just world Agarwal ought to have demanded compensation for his hard-won intellectual property.

On a personal front Anil Agarwal possessed an almost heroic determination. He conducted a long battle against chronic asthma, and then in 1994 was diagnosed as suffering from a very rare form of cancer which affected the eyes and brain. From his sick bed, while in remission he planned and carried out his last campaign. This related to the shamefully high levels of air pollution in Delhi. The CSE report on the problem was called—with an evocative economy so typical of the man—*Slow Murder*. This report almost single handedly forced the government to introduce remedial measures, these aimed both at vehicles and factories. Agarwal's insistence on Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) as Delhi's sole alternative to existing fuels became somewhat controversial. The jury is still out on whether CNG or low-sulphur diesel is the more suitable choice, yet

there is no gainsaying the fact that, without Agarwal and the CSE, the citizens of Delhi would still be subject to the *ancien regime* of pollution unchecked and undiagnosed.

For more than twenty years Anil Agarwal was India's most articulate and influential writer on the environment. Viewing his career in the round, one is struck by several features. First, an ability to synthesize the results of specialized scientific studies. Second, a knack of communicating this synthesis in accessible prose. Third, the insistence that it was not enough for the environmentalist to hector and chastise: solutions had to be offered, even if the state was as yet un-willing to act upon them.

One is impressed, too, by the range of Agarwal's work. Forests, water, biodiversity, climate change at the global level, air pollution in a single city: he studied and wrote about them all. What unites these dispersed and prolific writings is Agarwal's approach—he looks at environmental problems from the perspective of the poor. His oeuvre provides an intellectual and moral challenge to the belief that the poor are too poor to be green. He demonstrates that, in the biomass economies of the rural Third World, the poor have a vital interest in the careful management of forests, soil, pasture, and water. (The rich can more easily shift to alternative fuels and building materials.) In his later work, he shows likewise that, the more prosperous the country or community; the more likely it is to insulate itself from the harmful effects of pollution while passing on this burden to the disadvantaged.

If I had to recommend only one essay by Agarwal, it would be his World Conservation Lecture of 1985, first published in *The Environmentalist*, 1986, and reprinted in an anthology I edited, *Social Ecology* (Oxford University Press, 1994). This essay presents a detailed picture of environmental destruction in India, against the backdrop of the rather different Western experience. The examples are drawn from across the country and deal with a variety of natural resources. The conclusions are crisply and unambiguously stated. The 'first lesson' is that 'the main source of environmental destruction in the world is the demand for natural resources generated by the consumption of the rich (whether they are rich nations or rich individuals and groups within nations) . . .' The 'second lesson' is that 'it is the poor who are affected the most by environmental destruction'; thus, the 'eradication of poverty in a country like India is simply not possible without the rational management of our environment and that, conversely, environmental destruction will only intensify poverty.'

Agarwal anticipates in this essay a theme later picked up by feminist writers. As he put it:

The destruction of the environment clearly poses the biggest threat to marginal cultures and occupations like [those] of tribals, nomads, fisher-folk and artisans, which have always been heavily dependent on their immediate environment for their survival. But the maximum impact of the destruction of biomass sources is on women. Women in all rural cultures are affected, especially women from poor landless, marginal and small farming families. Seen from the point of view of these women, it can be argued that all development is ignorant of women's needs, and often anti-women, literally designed to increase their work burden.

The process of resource degradation, says Agarwal, has made it more difficult and dangerous for women to go about the business of collecting fuel, fodder and water. He makes an inspired distinction between ‘male’ trees—species promoted by forest departments seeking to increase their cash income—and ‘female’ trees, those species that lighten the woman’s load yet tend not to be favoured by public agencies. On the whole, Agarwal’s understanding of the gender dimensions of the environment debate was indubitably ahead of its time. It has always seemed to me that his precocity has not been adequately recognized, perhaps because in this regard he happened to belong to the wrong gender himself.

It was, I think, Voltaire who said that while one might seek to flatter the living, the dead deserve nothing less than the truth. No assessment of Anil Agarwal as writer and activist can overlook his flaws. These were personal as well as intellectual. Thus, while the first two pioneering Citizens’ Reports were being produced, Agarwal and the CSE were catalysts to a genuinely collaborative exercise. Over the years, however, Agarwal came to distance himself from many individuals and trends in the environmental community with whom he had once worked and who had contributed to his reports. Perhaps this alienation was related to his creeping cancer. Still, one could not altogether overcome the suspicion that the CSE would participate in a campaign only if it could orchestrate and direct it. One example was the organization’s withdrawal, over the 1990s, from the continuing struggle for forest democracy. Again, it is something of a pity that the activities of the Narmada Bachao Andolan were never adequately covered in the pages of the CSE fortnightly *Down to Earth*. Future historians of this most important social movement will find more meat in the reports of daily newspapers than in this specialist environmentalist journal.

Agarwal had a deeply prejudiced attitude towards the bureaucracy, which he distrusted and seemed at times to despise. This is a trait shared by some kinds of Gandhians and some kinds of Marxists, and indeed Agarwal was a sort of socialist Gandhian himself. What made his prejudice unpalatable is that he had no difficulty courting ruling politicians. At various times he closely identified himself with the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, the environment minister Kamal Nath, and Madhya Pradesh’s chief minister Digvijay Singh—with such men he kept in abeyance his sceptical attitude towards power and authority.

In an interview to *Seminar*, Agarwal described the bureaucracy as ‘pig-headed, obstinate and stupid’. ‘I don’t expect the bureaucracy to do it’, he added, speaking of natural resource management, adding: ‘The only way the bureaucracy will work together is if there is a drive from the top. These strictures appear to me to be excessive as well as false: forestry reform in West Bengal was initiated by capable and farsighted officials without directives from the ‘top’. There are good bureaucrats as well as bad ones. Agarwal hoped to dispense with the class altogether, a wish that seems naive in light of the needs of a complex modern society. (Perhaps, in a long distant past, a benevolent raja could actually ‘return the forests to the people’.) Our politicians need to be sensitized and—in my view more crucially—our bureaucrats humanized. This, of course, will take much persuasion and agitation. Still, a sustainable system of environmental management cannot come about by turning one’s back on officials of the state, whether they be paid or elected.

There are environmental activists who were wounded by Agarwal's capricious behaviour, and there are environmental scholars who were obliged to state their disagreement with aspects of his work. Yet even when we stopped speaking with him, we read him. This is a measure of his continuing importance, but I hope I have adequately stressed the other measures too. It was a privilege to have known him, and a honour to have been a fellow traveller on a rocky road—the Indian road to sustainability.